

# 中心無き世界における 中心としての東洋と西洋

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East and West as Centers  
in the Centerless World

權寧佑 外

## **East Asians in Soviet Intelligence**

– New Paradigms and Methods –

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This study (based on my presentation at Hankuk University on January 11, 2019) is about new paradigms and historical methodologies on East Asians in Soviet and Russian history. We begin with this fact: There has been little written in English about the Soviet Korean and Chinese contributions to the Soviet Union. This short presentation is about the research methods that I employed from 2006 to 2018 in the former Soviet Central Asia and Russia (primarily in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan). The methodology that I found to be optimal was based on a combination of archival work, structured interviews (that is oral

history) conducted over a period of years and the collection of personal photos. To begin with, the various interviews must be recorded using either audio or video technology. There must be a video or audio recording so that the interviewee cannot later claim that he or she was misquoted. This methodology is what I have called “three-dimensional history” and represents the fullest representation and re-creation of the past possible. “Structured” interviews refer to interviews with concrete questions and typically a linear timeline (for example, with questions moving chronologically from 1920 to 1945). Employing a combination of discrete and open-ended questions helps the researcher answer concrete academic and historical questions related to their particular field.

Returning to the title of this study, the primary question regarding methodology (“three-dimensional history”) is, “Why fieldwork, oral history interviews *in situ* and photographs?” My answer was that in the Russian archives, the Soviet Koreans and especially the Soviet Chinese were typically mentioned as subjects who were difficult to control and difficult to Sovietize (that is, assimilate into a heavily Russified socialist culture and political thought). They were seen and portrayed as subjects and not as “agents” and masters of their own destiny and somewhat-to-completely lacking in initiative according to the archives.

National minorities in communist, authoritarian states as well as

democracies in the 1920s and 1930s were typically portrayed as problematic in state registers and archives. They were often portrayed as poor or too uneducated, too different and or political liabilities to the states in which they resided (especially the diaspora peoples). For example, the USSR had 630k Poles in the 1939 Soviet census, 1.427 m. Soviet Germans, nearly 200k (actually 192k per 1939 census) Koreans, 30k Finns, 286.4k Greeks and by 1935 or so 50k Chinese (the official Soviet figures show a large undercount) within Soviet borders.<sup>1</sup> National minorities in the Soviet archives will never get their “just due.” The archives portray the state, its officials and its policies as molding the “clay” of the workers into the Soviet people. They rarely give credit, initiative and “agency” to the common people, local (ethnic and minority) cadres and local leaders.

## 1. My Argument and Fieldwork: The Lives of the Soviet Koreans and Chinese

I begin with three photos which are in figures 1 and 2. The first photo is of the three Korean NKVD officers, see Figure 1 below. In Russian,

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<sup>1</sup> Viktor Kozlov, *The Peoples of the Soviet Union*, trans. Pauline M. Tiffen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 206-207. The population figure for the Soviet Chinese is my “best” estimate.

Figure 1 below reads “Khan Chan Ger, from right, 1932 year, 15 March, Blagoveshchensk (Russia).” The photo shows three Korean NKVD officers with their hands on their belt clasps, which was an NKVD sign or mannerism meaning “ready to protect and serve (the USSR).” The NKVD refers to the Soviet political (secret) police. It was previously known as the OGPU (1923-1934) and sometime in 1954, the NKVD (and MVD) became the KGB. The author obtained (scanned) the photo while conducting a short interview with Revmir I. Khan in Kolkhoz Pravda outside of Tashkent, Uzbekistan.



Figure 1- Three Korean OGPU officers, March 15, 1932 in Blagoveshchensk, Russia. Photo courtesy of Revmir I. Khan.

Figure 2- Photo below (left)- Revmir I. Khan, June 9, 2009, photo by author. Revmir was the nephew of Khan Chan Ger (Gol) or Grigorii Eliseevich Khan (in Russian). He allowed me to copy his family photo of Khan Chan Ger and the others. He was the son of Khan Chan Ir. Right photo- Revmir I. Khan's Soviet military identification card with Khan's signature, date of birth, and the stamp of the Uzbek SSR Military Commission. Photos below- Courtesy of Revmir I. Khan.



Figure 3- Map of Blagoveshchensk, Russia below. Khan Chan Ger was the Head/Chief (*Nachalnik*) of the NKVD Third Division in Birobidzhan. The map naturally leads to the question, “Why was Khan Chan Ger and the others in the first photo in Blagoveshchensk on the day of March 15, 1932 (Figure 1 photo)?” Blagoveshchensk happened to be 515 kilometers away from where Khan typically worked and resided (according to google maps, Blagoveshchensk is 515 km. from Birobidzhan, Russia). The map which has been modified is courtesy of Wikitravel.



Figure 3- See Birobidzhan and Blagoveshchensk. Note that Heihe faces Blagoveshchensk on the Chinese side of the border. It was previously known as Sakhalien. Map courtesy of Wikitravel.

Next, we will examine a photo (Figure 4 below) of eight NKVD officers which was taken in Blagoveshchensk, Russia sometime in the 1930s. This photo was included in the book *Maki Mirage: From the History of the Fatherland's Special Services* (*Maki Mirazh: iz istorii otechestvennykh spetssluzhb*, 2000) as well as in the article, “The Great Fatherland War Could Have Begun Three Years Earlier.” It was taken sometime in the 1930s in Blagoveshchensk. The book and several articles on the operation Maki Mirage told the story of “Russians” and their heroic exploits (in the photo below) without any mention of the

work and the roles of the three Asian men in the photo. In this case, all three were Chinese NKVD officers. Immediately, I knew there was something wrong with this version of Soviet history and how this “historiography” was being composed. This was because I had evidence and photos of Koreans and Chinese in OGPU/NKVD uniforms (such as Figure 1) and long interviews with their direct family members (in the case of Ven Sian Liu and Anna Vasilevna Ti). However, I was very fortunate that Li Xuei, the PRC ambassador to Russia, began negotiations for archival files on the Chinese Lenin School of Vladivostok beginning in 2012. These archival files were used to compose a monograph entitled *The Chinese Diaspora in Vladivostok*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition written and published by D.A. Ancha and N.G. Miz in 2015.



Figure 4 (above)- Courtesy of *Komsomolskaia pravda*.



The post-Soviet historiography by S. Nikolaev (real name Nikolai S. Chumakov), several post-Soviet documentary films and articles on Operation Maki Mirage are very problematic since none of them give any mention to the East Asian agents (over 600 from 1920 to 1945) and their feats of loyalty and bravery. This is a very racialized view of Soviet history and its peoples which is antagonistic and chauvinistic. It does not give any indication that the USSR was truly socialist, egalitarian or believed in its slogan of “internationalism abroad and domestically.” “Internationalism” for the Soviets meant in today’s terms something akin to diversity or multiculturalism. If the state cannot show “internationalism” or diversity within Russian and Soviet borders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it would have been that much harder in the actual period of the 1920s and 1930s (when the above missions took place).

In 2008, there was a film on the Maki Mirage operation entitled *Operation: Ghost Agent* (*Операция «Агент призрак»* is the name of the film in Russian) and again the same story about the “Russians” (who were not only Russians, but also Ukrainians, Tatars, Jews and Georgians) doing all of the hard work and receiving all of the recognition. From 2008 to 2014, there were several newspaper articles (around six or more) on the Maki Mirage operations, none of which mentioned the contributions of the East Asian agents. Many of the photos taken on the various missions to Manchuria, Shanghai, and Korea for Operation Maki Mirage by OGPU, NKVD and GRU officers were destroyed

during the Great Terror [the purges of the Great Terror, 1936-1938]. The photo-studio was in Blagoveshchensk. A photo or photos were taken of the agents before each of their missions. Due to the events of the Great Terror, most of these photos were destroyed. This is yet another reason why a historian, anthropologist or ethnographer needs to conduct fieldwork and scan personal photos from the said fieldwork. The oft-used photo of the eight NKVD officers in figure 4 is both serendipitous and problematic. It is a photo which was constantly used as a symbol of the Maki Mirage operations and yet, completely insufficient as an explanation (based on current Russian historiography from 2000 to 2014).

At 35:54 minutes of the film *Agent Prizrak*, there is a list of names. The list contains the names of Van In Zun (ВАН-ИН-ЗУН, number #11 on the list to the left) and Khan Chan Ger (ХАН-ЧАН-Гер) number #59 on the list to the right. From my interviews I learned that Khan was the leader of the Korean NKVD regiments and Van (Wang) was the leader of the Chinese regiments.

At this point, I didn't quite have enough information to write a comprehensive article on East Asians in Soviet intelligence. But this is where a bit of luck (again) played an important role. In 2012, Li Khuei, the PRC ambassador to Russia began negotiations with the Russian Federation on the release of their archival materials on the Chinese Lenin School, a school where 400 OGPU and NKVD agents of Korean and Chinese descent were trained from 1924/1925 to 1937. This project culminated with the publication of a monograph in 2014 by two Russian historians, Dmitrii A. Ancha and Nelli G. Miz (the 1<sup>st</sup> edition was a China-only edition, with exclusive rights belonging to the PRC- The People's

Republic of China) entitled *Chinese Diaspora in Vladivostok* and then a Russian language, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition which was sold to the general public and published by Dalnauka in 2015 also entitled *Chinese Diaspora in Vladivostok*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. The picture below is Li Khuei, PRC Ambassador to Russia from 2012 to 2014 (Figure 6).



Figure 6- Screenshot/photo of Li Khuei (right) courtesy of the author, Jon K. Chang.

## 2. The Functions of the Chinese–Lenin School of Vladivostok

The Chinese-Lenin School was established for the expressed purpose of teaching and educating future Chinese comrades/socialists, creating a publishing and translation house for socialist literature in the Chinese language and for the recruitment and training of East Asian (Koreans

and Chinese) agents of Soviet intelligence. Note that the acronyms OGPU/NKVD also included a subdivision, the INO (the Foreign Division of the Soviet political police) and the acronym GRU (Soviet military intelligence) also included its regional nomenclature the RO, OKDVA which stands for “the Intelligence Division of the Special Banner Far Eastern Army.” Some students at the CLS were in fact “cadets” who had been recruited from the two Soviet intelligence organs, OGPU/NKVD and OKDVA (Red Army). The cadets with former military training and experience in the Red Army were majority Koreans (and some local Soviet Chinese), while the students were mostly Chinese from China. Both cadets and students were at the CLS (Chin. Lenin School in Vladivostok). They were trained in reconnaissance and sabotage outside of the USSR and trained and sent in “special groups” from between five to ten people.

Comrade Usenko taught the cadets to shoot. They were tested while firing from a shooting range and hitting targets on the run. There was also training at local safe-houses which covered the physical, technical and theoretical components of intelligence. Students would learn how to physically collect intelligence and conduct reconnaissance. Students would also demonstrate their knowledge of how they would operate various electronic devices and other equipment (technical). Third, the cadets were tested on the theoretical bases behind various operations and why some operations or tactics were employed rather than others.

Finally, the instructors Zybalov and Makstis (see Figure 7) gave the students regular boxing and weight-lifting sessions. From 1924 to 1937, there were approximately four hundred Chinese and Korean agents trained at the Chinese-Lenin School. During my fieldwork, I met six families (five Korean and one Chinese) who were descendents of OGPU/NKVD and GRU officers. None of the six had ever attended the Chinese-Lenin School or any institutions of higher education. Thus, an additional two hundred plus East Asian agents and officers need to be added who were recruited through other channels. Additionally, my fieldwork and interviews revealed that these agents conducted foreign missions for Soviet intelligence from 1920 to 1945 (rather than solely 1924 to 1937 which is the period of the CLS' missions).



Figure 7- Left Photo: Top row, L-R- Sin Sinsan (mid-1920s photo) and Usenko. Middle row, L-R- Zybalov and Makstis. Bottom-Vrabel (Chin. name- I Tinsan). Note that Sin Sinsan was the man in the second row, far right in Figure 4 of the eight OGPU/NKVD officers. Photo above courtesy of Dmitrii A. Ancha.



Figure 8- Nikolai Nigai- May 29, 1934  
Shkotovo outside of Vladivostok. The elusive  
photo of a Korean in NKVD uniform. I had  
to visit Raisa Nigai (his sister) many times at  
Kolkhov Sverdlov, outside of Tashkent,  
Uzbekistan before she showed me Nikolai's  
photo in NKVD uniform and allowed me to

scan it. Nikolai Nigai took part in the Korean deportation of 1937. He began  
working as a translator for the OGPU (before it became NKVD) in 1928. Photo  
courtesy of Raisa Nigai.

Finally, there is the case of Anna Vasilevna Ti whose father Khai Ir  
was an NKVD translator. Ms. Ti's family did not have a photo of Khai  
Ir Ti in NKVD uniform. Thus, I scanned the family photos which were  
available (see left photo below, 1950). However, the photo on the right  
in Figure 9 is at least partial evidence supporting Ms. Ti's claim that her  
father worked for the NKVD and that her family was one of the state  
elites (*nomenklatura*). In the photo to the right, Anna Vasilevna's Soviet  
school had two teachers, six students, one maid and a Christmas tree.  
This is highly unusual and not at all representative of the conditions of  
a typical Soviet school. The photo was taken on January 1, 1939. Anna  
V. Ti is standing in the second row, second from the left. Regarding her  
father, Khai Ir Ti was born in 1909 in Korea and moved to Manchuria

as a child. He fought as a partisan with Kim Il Sung's partisan regiments in Manchuria until the IJA (Imperial Japanese Army) chased his regiment to Russia somewhere around 1933-34.



Figure 9- Khai Ir Ti, left. Both photos courtesy of Anna Vasilevna Ti.

In summary, the archives and the historian composing the said historiography do not always write history with the intention to give a full and unbiased account. Sometimes, a comprehensive and balanced account of the past is written, while in others, history is written with strong political, social, ethnic and ideological biases. As I have demonstrated above, the missing historiography for the contributions of the East Asian agents in Soviet intelligence is an excellent example of the latter case; a case where national minorities of the USSR were marginalized and written out of history during the Soviet and post-



Soviet periods.<sup>2</sup> This has major implications for how Soviet socialism was practiced (the realities for the Soviet minority peoples) rather than the utopianism of how it was preached (taught to be).

Returning to methodologies in history, if one wishes to find an “uncommon truth,” that is one which really stands out, the researcher should consider adding fieldwork *in situ*, structured interviews and the collection of photographs to the standard practice of history based primarily on state archives. In order to obtain relatively good interviews, one should be open to answering all questions that the interviewee has. One should not hold a “power-distance” where the academic or interviewer parses information while expecting the other side to “freely” give information. If the researcher does this (referring to a “power- distance”), he or she will simply receive an “official history” or an oft-repeated, safe version from the subject. Interviewees (subjects) typically want to know “Why do you want this information?,” “Can I trust you?,” and “Can I give you what you are looking for?” They will ask the researcher these types of questions whether explicitly or implicitly. Be prepared to interview or visit someone several times before they (the subjects) truly feel comfortable speaking to the researcher. This in my opinion is how one writes “three dimensional

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2 Jon K. Chang, “East Asians in Soviet Intelligence and the Chinese-Lenin School of the Russian Far East,” *Eurasia Border Review* 9 (2018): 45-65.

history” consisting of interviews, photos, *in situ* fieldwork and archival work. I have applied the aforementioned principles of *3-D history* in writing *Burnt by the Sun: The Koreans of the Russian Far East*.

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“This book is supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea with CORE (Initiative for College of Humanities’ Research and Education).”

Young Woo Kwon et al, eds., *East and West as Centers in the Centerless World* (Tokyo: Okura Info Service, 2019).

Also: Jon K. Chang, “East Asians in Soviet Intelligence: New Paradigms and Methods,” in *East and West as Centers in the Centerless World*, eds. Young Woo Kwon et al (Tokyo: Okura Info Service, 2019), 145-161.